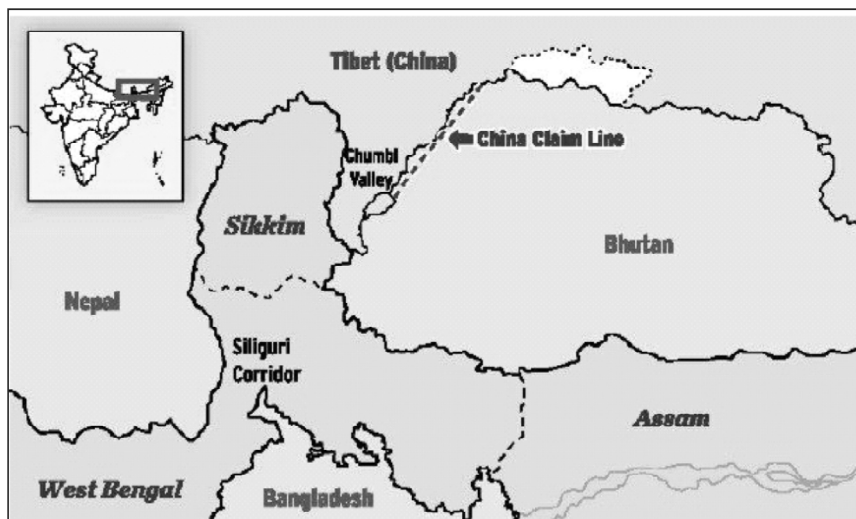


Tibet trade through the Chumbi Valley— growth, rupture and reopening

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Chumbi Valley (map not to scale)

Abstract : *Extensive land and maritime networks have crisscrossed Asia for centuries providing for the basis for encounters between diverse peoples and cultures. The Chumbi Valley of Tibet at the tri junction between Bhutan, India and China (Tibet) is one such corridor that has made possible a stream of human migration from Tibet to the south and also the exchange of religious and political ideas. This has also been the traditional route for trade with Tibet. Forced open by the British in 1904 through the Younghusband Expedition this remained the most popular trade route between Tibet and Kalimpong in*

Darjeeling district till 1962 China war when the border was finally sealed off. Of late trade has started again from 2006 but the nature has completely changed. China has strategic motivations in the region and that is reflected in its continued military modernization, rapid force deployment and expanding communication network in the region. China's presence in Chumbi Valley not only gives her proximity to India's North -East and particularly the Siliguri corridor but ultimately gives passage to Nepal and Bhutan. The decision to reopen trade through Sikkim was a political decision on part of the two contending states but the nature of this trade is different from what it used to be earlier. Chumbi Valley has transformed from a little trodden path to a high security zone. It symbolizes the historical transformation of the region as a whole.

Key Words : *Tibet, Sikkim, Darjeeling, China, trade, security.*

Chumbi Valley is the region of great geo strategic importance in the eastern Himalayas. It lies in the tri junction between Bhutan, India and China but actually the region where Chumbi Valley is situated has passed through several political transformations. Though in China now, it used to be a part of erstwhile Tibet which after Chinese takeover of the country in 1959 became TARC i.e. Tibet the Autonomous Region of China. It shares border with Sikkim in the west and Bhutan in the east. Sikkim is a part of India now but till 1973 it used to be an independent kingdom. It is 5 km from Siliguri corridor - in the northern part of the state of West Bengal in India which is commonly described as the chicken neck that connects India to Northeast India and also to Nepal and Bhutan. Because of its location, the Chumbi Valley is of geostrategic importance to both the giant states of India and China. It is often described as the 'dagger drawn at India's heart'.

Because of its strategic location it has been vital in shaping the history of the region. On one hand it has been the corridor through which migration has taken place from the region of Tibet to the south and vice versa and on the other hand the route has also been used by the travellers to carry on some trade with the bordering areas. The British eyed this route for an access to Tibet and from there if possible to China. The nature and volume

of actual exchanges altered simultaneously with the changing geo political scenario of the region.

To begin with a description of the valley itself, the two passes of Nathu-la in Sikkim (14,000 ft) and Jelep-la (14,390 ft.) in Kalimpong of Darjeeling district are the two gateways to the valley . Of these two, Jelep-la used to be the most frequented of all the passes opening out into the Mochu valley near Chumbi. The road from there leads directly to Lhasa – the capital of Tibet. Two other less frequented passes are Yak-la (14,400 ft.) which is close to Nathu-la and Cho-la (14,550 ft.) which leads more directly to Chumbi than any of the above and was formerly the main route from Sikkim to Phari in Chumbi.¹

‘Along the trade route followed by the traveler, however, the eye is held (to the right side of the trail) for several days of the march by the immense mountain mass of Chomo-lhari, the Queen of the Divine Hills, a mountain sacred to all Tibetans and situated along the Tibet-Bhutan border at an elevation of nearly 24,000 feet... . The fascination of Tibet lies in its utter bleakness and wilderness,... once the traveler has climbed onto the plateau... not a bush, let alone a tree, breaks the monotony of the windswept plains, until he reaches the town of Gyantse.’²

In between the two was Phari - at an elevation of well over 14,000 feet and very cold and windy. Phari was described as an ‘eerie town’ consisting of a rude collection of stone and sod houses ‘dominated by a huge grim looking fort.’ It was a market town, always bustling with activities throughout the year ‘it seemed an altogether discouraging place to live.’ This was because of its dirt. The town has been described by travelers as the highest, windiest, dirtiest town in the world...’This bleak town was always cold, even during the summer , so cold, in fact that ‘despite the refuse of hundreds of years in the narrow spaces between the houses, there was little or no odor because of the dry, bitterly cold climate.’³

Phari is also called the head of the Chumbi Valley. The route from there leads to Gyantse and then to Lhasa itself. Gyantse was the seat of an important Tibetan administrative district with population of about 5000. This

was also the meeting place of the three travel routes. To the western side along the river Nyang was situated Shigatse, Tibet's second city and the seat of the Panchen Lama. Towards the east over six thousand feet in Katro Lhasa was situated – the sacred as well as the forbidden capital of Tibet.

'Near to the city of Gyantse...could be found numerous farms and villas surrounded by fair sized groves of poplar and willow trees' and 'acres of dwarf iris'. Situated in the middle of a fertile valley which was entirely surrounded by hills (reaching to 16,000 feet) and that was crisscrossed with irrigation channels, Gyantse (itself over 13,000 ft high) had from time immemorial quickly become 'one of Tibet's leading communities inasmuch as through its portals passed all the trade from the east on its way to Northwest Tibet and Ladakh and to Nepal, India and Bhutan.'⁴

Gyantse possessed a particularly 'busy and elaborate' bazaar that was rich in colour, human interest and activity, wrote one visitor in 1949, -'the goods are spread out on the ground or on rough table... and the merchants often sit under large umbrellas or awnings, where they enjoy gossiping as much as making sales... here one could find Chinese brick tea, Tibetan salt and soda, dried fruits, jewelry, dyes, handwoven Tibetan rugs, and bowls made of silver birch transported from Bhutan.'⁵

Through this route - was carried on the entire southward bound Tibetan trade with Bengal or Sikkim. In 1962, following the Indo China war both the routes were closed down. Of late, however, trade has started once again through Nathu-la in Sikkim.

From Tibet to Sikkim via Chumbi

The influence of Tibet on the demography and culture of Sikkim has been profound and this influence has travelled mainly through the Chumbi Valley. The valley, at one point of time was regarded as a part of Sikkim itself. Sikkim was situated just next to Tibet but in this mountainous region with little or no communication and very few inhabitants, there was hardly any concept of a border between the two countries and thus, in absence of any demarcated border as such or even an accurate account of the same it is

difficult to come to a definite conclusion regarding the actual extent of the state. Ashley Eden, in 1864, in the report of his political mission to Bhutan noticed that 'Sikkim, though a very petty state then was formerly a fair sized country reaching from the Arun river on the west to the Taigon pass on the east, from Tibet on the north to Kissingunge in Purneah on the south.' Risley further clarifies that it included the Mochu valley.⁶ Since the river Mochu is variously known as Amochu or Chumbi it implies that Chumbi valley was very much a part of Sikkim. Even though it is difficult either to accept or refute this perception it is true that Sikkim has lost a bulk of its original territory – one portion that has become part of West Bengal now is Darjeeling that was handed over to the British by the king of Sikkim himself in 1835. On the whole it is possible that Chumbi Valley at one point of time was indeed a part of Sikkim.

The boundary between Sikkim and Tibet was 'clearly defined' for the first time by the Britain – China Convention of 17.03.1890. Clause I of the Convention defined the same as the 'crest of the mountain range separating the waters following into Sikkim Teesta and its effluents from the waters flowing into the Tibetan Mochu and northwards into other rivers of Tibet. The line commences at mount Gimpochi on the Bhootan frontier and follows the above mentioned water parting to the point where it meets Nepal territory'.⁷

Situated next to Tibet, Sikkim has been profoundly influenced by Tibet. This influence has come basically through the *Kham-pa* or *Kham – ba* – immigrants from the Tibetan province of Kham, commonly called Bhutias. The Bhutia migration to Sikkim took place in phases Khye Bumsa being one of the earliest immigrants. He had established a cordial relation with the local Lepchas and was even blessed by the Lepcha wizard for a son. The descendants of Khye Bumsa are divided into six families. With Khye Bumsa came other Tibetans or *khampas* who founded the 8 fields or the tribe of eight respectable names. These are the 14 original main families of Tibetan origin in Sikkim. It was these Bhutias that finally managed to set up their own kingdom in Sikkim in 1642.⁸ The Bhutia kings came to be

known as the Chogyals and Buddhism was proclaimed as the state religion. The original inhabitants of the Lepchas and Limbus were relegated into the background. Buddhism remained the state religion till the merger of the state with India. As stated above, the hill regions of the district of Darjeeling of West Bengal was with Sikkim till 1835 when it was handed over to the British by the king of Sikkim. By virtue of its historical tie with Sikkim, Darjeeling too came to share some of the demographic and cultural characteristics of Tibet. There are some Bhutias in Darjeeling but there was neither monarchy in this part of India and nor did the region had any state religion.

Trade through the Chumbi Valley

Since the route of communication between Sikkim and Tibet passed through the Chumbi Valley, it was only likely that there was a steady flow of humanity through this way. One purpose of such movement was definitely trade. In absence of any written documents or records in Sikkim in this period it is not possible to form any idea about the actual quantity of the trade but it can be safely assumed that there were some transborder commodity exchanges carried on by the locals in the region. The items were few and volume was small. The growth of trade between Tibet and India through the Chumbi Valley on a much larger scale was a later development of the British period. Initially Nathu la and then Jelep – la became the entrepots of this trade.

The political situation in Tibet was not conducive to any large scale trade with the outside world. Tibet was a forbidden country not only for the Britishers but for any person of western or non Buddhist origin. No formal permission was given to the Britishers to carry on official trade or to open any trading mart inside Tibet. Informal trade however was always there.

The earliest reference to Tibetan traders in the Darjeeling region is found in the account of Campbell. In 1848 he came across a party of Tibetans en route to Darjeeling. Another description of 1865 by Rennie gives an idea about how negligible this trade could have been before this period. In 1865, Rennie wrote, 'At the present time, no extent of trade

exists and what does is carried on chiefly on sheep used as pack animals. Wool is the principal commodity brought from Thibet, cotton and tobacco being taken back in exchange. Ponies also, gold, silver, precious stones, coarse woolen and China goods are sometimes brought over from Thibet. The traders generally pass from Thibet about November before the snows set in, and return in spring after the melting of the snow has commenced: passes in the mountains being impracticable in the interval. Judging however, from the number of Thibetians seen about Darjeeling during the period I was there, they evidently either remain until later periods of the year or come across during the summer months as well.⁹

It was actually in the second half of the 19th century that the trade expanded. It was a result of the political as well as economic interests of the British rulers of India. Their attempt to surge through this route to Tibet brought out the strategic location of the Chumbi Valley. Growth of trade through this route and opening up of Tibet by the British were the two significant developments of the late 19th century.

Immediately after the annexation of Darjeeling in 1835 the British rulers explored the possibilities of transborder trade in the region. Reports were prepared by officers in Darjeeling in 1864 and 1873 on the possibilities, along with all other related information like routes, items and impediments, if any, of trade. Both the reports pointed out the imperfect communication system as the basic obstacle to development of trade and even justified the construction of railways for the purpose.

There are references to Tibetan traders in such reports. The report of 1873 mentions such traders but it is not very clear whether the people who traded were actually Tibetans from the heartland of the country or people living in the border areas of Sikkim. In any case it was clear that these people had access to Phari in Chumbi Valley and they had already started exploring the possibilities of trade with Darjeeling. On 28th October 1873 Edgar also met some traders who were on their way to Darjeeling where they wanted to exchange coarse blanket for tobacco. At Keu Laka he met a family of herds-men from whom he learnt that they had supplied butter

and cream cheese to the markets of Darjeeling and Lhasa. These markets were mainly dependent for beef, butter and cheese of the herds of cow of the Phari region of Chumbi Valley. By the turn of the century Tibetan trade ventures in the region became quite frequent. Darjeeling grew as a coveted hill station and the scope of trade and business also expanded. Around the last quarter of the 19th century Tibetan traders visited the Sunday market of the town regularly. R.D. O'Brien, in his description of Darjeeling wrote, '... if you pick up the very dirtiest man or woman you can find, be sure he or she is a Thibetan trader. These people cross the snowy range annually about November, bringing with them rock salt, yak tails, sometimes gold dust, musk and other commodities of various kinds besides sheep, goats in large flocks. These they sell and return laden with tobacco, broadcloth, piece goods, and other commodities in February, March. During their stay in Darjeeling they live in small tents which they bring with them. Their favourite encamping ground is the Lebong spur.'¹⁰

The items imported from Tibet were horse, blankets, tea, turquoise, wool, musk, oxtails, musical instruments and shoes while the items exported to Tibet included tobacco, indigo and *kutch*. The Tibetan traders took the route starting from Chola, Yekla, Nathula, Cumra, and Dargas. All this met in Sikkim through which they entered Darjeeling via Gangtok and Dikeeling.

Trade between Darjeeling subdivision and Tibet however, was not to last long. In course of time, after the annexation of Kalimpong in 1865, the Indo Tibetan trade via Darjeeling gradually shifted to the newly developed town of Kalimpong which was more suitably located for the caravan coming down from Jelep-la and Nathu-la. One most important article of this was coarse wool of Tibet which began to be imported in huge amount. The growth of Kalimpong as another hill town of Darjeeling owed much to this Tibet trade through Jelep - la. This wool was stored in the godowns that came up in Kalimpong. While there were Tibetan traders who carried the articles to Kalimpong and even stayed in the town there were several Indian traders, most of them Marwaris, who traded with this article and re exported them to the south of Bengal and sometimes to other parts of India and even

abroad. Rise of this trade changed the character of the Darjeeling hills and particularly Kalimpong.

As for the scope of trade from Sikkim to Tibet by the British, it was defined by the Sikkim –Tibet Convention of 5.2.1893. Before that in 1861, by the Treaty of Tumloong the British Government extracted full liberty of commerce between the British and Sikkim subjects and some other concessions regarding commercial transactions. The right to open roads through Sikkim for trade was also ensured. It was a matter of time that they would step out into the Chumbi Valley from Sikkim and this was ensured by the Convention of 1893.¹¹ A trade mart was to be established at Yatung on the Tibetan side of the frontier that would be open to all the British subjects for trade. The Government of India was to be free to send officers to reside there to watch the condition of British trade and the British subjects were at liberty to travel to and fro between the frontier and Yatung, to reside in Yatung and to rent houses and godowns for their own accommodation and the storage of their goods. British subjects would be free to carry on the trade and some tax exemptions were also announced by the Convention. The foothold that the British gained in the Chumbi Valley as a result of this convention culminated by the Great Britain – Tibet Convention of 07.09.1904 consequent to the Younghusband Expedition of the same year.

Along with traders came the others as well. The route to Kalimpong through Jelep-la was frequented by the whole range of people who wanted to visit this part of India - from the sacred to the profane, the monks and the pilgrims, students, politicians, and activists, and even some common people who wanted to make India their home. Tibet's relations with China complicated from the 1911 Republican Revolution onwards and particularly worsened in the 1950s. The movement of people also increased. Rich Tibetans who could afford sent their children to schools in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, rented houses and even settled down in these towns. After 1959 when the Dalai Lama the IVth Himself fled Tibet and took refuge in India, He was followed by thousands of his countrymen, most of whom

followed this much trodden path through Chumbi Valley to enter India.

From Chumbi to Lhasa – The British expedition of 1903 - 04

The Younghusband Expedition of 1903- 4 to Tibet was an event of far reaching significance for the history of this region. Among the many results of the expedition, one most important one was that this expedition forced open the doors of the forbidden land of Tibet for the first time and gave the British chance to fulfill their long cherished dream of opening up the land route to the heart of Tibet.¹²

The post of British trade agent came into being from the days of 1904 treaty. The British were permitted to maintain one trade representative and one company of Indian infantry with two British officers in charge in Tibet. The majority of these troops were stationed in Gyantse but merely a small detachment of them was kept at Yatung. The agency's headquarters itself was situated at Yatung.

Between Yatung and Gyantse - a distance of about 140 miles - was dotted every 10/15 miles with comfortable British built Dak Banglows for use of both travelers and officials. This strategic trade route was jointly administered by both British and Tibetan trade agents in accordance with the treaty of 1904 at Lhasa. The trade agents were normally stationed in the Tibetan towns of Yatung and Gyantse. The term trade agents however were in a sense misleading because British Trade Agency had little to do with trade matters. The agent was more of a vice consular or even a consul general. He was given the title of Trade Agent because he was appointed by the British Foreign Office due to the indefiniteness of the political relations between China and Tibet. The post had come into being from the days of 1904 treaty signed between Tibet and Britain to terminate the Younghusband military expedition to Lhasa.

The Indian colonial functionaries began to draw schemes for further commercial linkage of Tibet with their Indian empire. Steps were taken to establish trade agency in the Tibetan town of Shigatse also. Charles Bell, Settlement officer, Kalimpong proposed and surveyed the route to link the valley to the Indian railway system. About 50 miles long railway track

between the Gangetic plains and Chumbi Valley on the narrowest location across the Himalayas was proposed to be the commercial link of the Himalayan plateau to the industrial belt of Bengal. But it was not to be as Curzon had to leave India.

The Tibetans who traded

It was in this period that the Tibet trade of Kalimpong really flourished. The most important items of trade were in the hands of a few families whose agents resided in Kalimpong and elsewhere. Among such big traders was Pangda Tsang. Their family business spread over whole Tibet as far as China. Their family business house had branch in Calcutta, Sanghai and even Peking. In India, their network included Kalimpong. They also controlled large section of Tibeto-China trade. Other trading families from Kham in east Tibet were Sadu Tsang, Gyang Tsang and Andru Tsang. The last one had taken a pioneering role in organizing some anti China movements in Lhasa in 1950s.¹³ Most of these trading families settled in Kalimpong.

In addition to the business families there were many small traders involved in this trade. Apart from wool which had an overseas market as far as America, the items of trade included stones, original and imitation, musk and opium. The Tibetans did a brisk business during the World War II particularly when a transit trade had developed to Lichian in northern Yunnan by way of Kalimpong, Gyatse, Lhasa and Chamdo. The trade continued till the Chinese takeover of Tibet.¹⁴

There were Tibetan traders coming to the town of Kalimpong regularly during the winter. This was a period of activities and changed the otherwise quiet character of the town. Initially they were few in number but their number grew over time. They were easily distinguishable from the locals of Kalimpong - the Lepchas and the Nepalis.

The present day Tenth and Eleventh Mile areas of Kalimpong were the places where the Tibetans stayed. The Eleventh Mile was the place of the poorer classes. The Tenth by contrast had emerged as the site for offices, warehouses and shops along with some of the Tibetan houses. Marwari shops and Nepali silversmith establishments were also there in

between. In the shops of the wealthy Tibetans sold thick bundles of joss stick, blankets made from coarse Tibetan wool, Chinese rice bowls of paper thin porcelain, yak tails, bales of silk and brocade, basketful of turquoise and old silver coins, beads, skin of snow leopards, as well as ritual and musical objects for prayers in the monasteries. Wool godowns, caravanserais for housing and stabling the Tibetans and their animals were also seen. The entire area busy at the daytime wore a different look at the night. It had a night life as well. It was the time of enjoyment - at times with ladies of 'easy virtue'.

As a result of this trade, a considerable Tibetan population started staying permanently in the town. The trade came to a sudden halt after the border was sealed following the Indo China war of 1962. The town of Kalimpong suffered a jolt as a result of this and it lost most of its business and business communities.

Nathula - reopened

Of late trade has reopened between Tibet (China) and India through Nathula in Sikkim but this is qualitatively different and carried on under strict government surveillance.

Following many rounds of discussions and trade agreements, border trade through Nathula pass formally resumed on 6th July 2006. Initially the mood in Sikkim was absolutely upbeat at the prospect of the opening of the trade. It was hoped that regional economy would be bolstered and Siliguri and Jalpaiguri in West Bengal would also benefit by emerging as transshipment points for goods arriving from Kolkata port for Tibet and China. At these two places, the plan was to load goods in smaller containers before they could make their way up the hills to Nathula via Gangtok. Besides sending goods for the Indian market, Chinese exports to South-East Asia, Bangladesh and Myanmar could also be routed through Nathula. It was further hoped that this would not only boost the trade and commerce but also support tourism. Thegu or Tshrethang which are 10 km below - could well emerge as the immigration point for tourists at a later date. Buddhist tourists would easily access Gaya, Lumbini, Sarnath and monasteries in Sikkim through the

Nathula Pass it was hoped. The Rumtek monastery in Sikkim, the main centre for the Karmapa Buddhist sect could become a major tourist attraction.¹⁵

All the details regarding business hours and items were worked out beforehand.

As for the business hours, it was decided that border trade markets would remain open from Monday to Thursday every week from morning 7:30 am to afternoon 3:30 pm Indian time and 10 am to 6 pm Chinese time would be the timings for the border trade. The trading period for the first four years was also chalked out. —

2006 - 2007 - 6th July 2006 - 3rd September 2007

2007 - 2008 - 1st May 2007 - 30th November 2007

2008 - 2009 - 19th May 2008 - 27th November 2008

2009 - 2010 - 1st May 2009 - 30th Nov 2009¹⁶

The lists of export and import items were laid down. 29 items were recognised as exportable to China. These included agriculture implements, blankets, copper products, clothes, cycles, coffee, tea, barley, rice, flour, dry Fruits, dry and fresh vegetables, vegetable oil, gur and misri, tobacco, snuff, spices, shoes, kerosene oil, stationary, utensils, wheat, liquor, milk processed product, canned food, cigarettes, local herb, palm oil and hardware. The items that were recognised importable from China were:-

goat skin, sheep skin, wool, raw silk, yak tail, yak hair, china clay, borax, butter, goat kashmiri, common salt, horse, goat and sheep.

A permit fee of Rs. 50 each will be levied for every vehicle entering Sikkim side from China. Similarly, a fee of 5 Yauns (Rs. 5 equal to one Yaun) will be levied for every vehicle crossing over to the Chinese side upto the trade mart point at Renqinggang.

However, the actual trade failed to fulfill the regional expectations. Trade remained limited both in terms of number of tradable items as well as the volume of the same. Trade increased from INR 2 million in 2006 to a meager INR 9.85 million with zero imports in 2010.¹⁷ The official figures suggested that the Chinese who crossed the border for trade in fact only

bought Indian goods and did not sell anything. This led to ample suspicions regarding the nature of Chinese sales in India. Neither side was happy with the trade items.

The Sikkim government repeatedly approached the Union Government for a revision of the list of tradable items. The grievance was echoed by the traders themselves from both sides saying that the list in the schedule was obsolete without any commercial value. The traders from both sides voiced their concerns stating that it was not a lucrative trade anymore but inconvenient and therefore 'illogical that Indian traders would have to go all the way to Tibet to buy yak's tail and the Tibetans coming all the way to buy jaggery'. Even officials on the Chinese side acknowledged that the trading list was outdated. 'The approved list was made in the 1960s, which could not meet the increasing demand of the Chinese and Indian people near the border due to fast economic development,' Kelsang Dekyi, deputy head of Yadong County, told *China Daily*. More than 66 percent of the traders here had left since the reopening of the market, he added explaining that business was not easy with too many restrictions on the goods that could be traded. Many a times they have gone on strike but till now neither the Union Government of India nor the Chinese government has responded positively to the demand for the revision of the list.

In fact, a look at the trading list reveals that there has hardly any substantial export from Sikkim into China. In fact, the number of non-tradable items was more than the legally specified tradable items. These restrictions made illegal trade rampant on the border. Many items which were not on the list like Chinese flasks, blankets, carpets and beers were increasingly finding their way into Gangtok and other adjoining areas. Although traders from both sides were legally supposed to trade only in US dollars, they were illegally engaged in trade using local currency. This issue came to light when the officials from State Bank of India stationed at a satellite office complained traders would hardly exchange currency for border trade.

On the whole it has remained a reality that reopening of Nathula has failed to regenerate the local economy as it was expected to do. The

stakeholders point out that the trading through this route should not only include the local trading community of Sikkim but also involve business communities other than the locals. This, along with the infrastructural developments could bring in long-term benefits to people from both sides of the border. But it all depends on a lot of other geo strategic and security concerns and both the countries have to tread a cautious path in this respect.

Chumbi Valley – the high security zone of modern times

Of late Chumbi Valley has assumed a different geo strategic importance and has become crucial from the perspective of Sino Indian relations. Despite several talks since 1962, the border issues between India and China have not been solved.¹⁸ The two sides continue to maintain a frigid friendly relation and Chumbi Valley has become crucial for territorial ambition and security concern of both China and India. The Chumbi Valley has become an area of great geo strategic importance to China because of its shared border with Sikkim and Bhutan. With control over Tibet, Chinese ambition in the region is very well manifested in the Chumbi Valley.

By virtue of its presence in Tibet, China has gained proximity to India's Northeast and Siliguri corridor. Access to Chumbi Valley has got China closer to Bangladesh as well. China has already started a policy of enhancing connectivity through a well laid out road and railway network.¹⁹ According to sources there have been indications of Chinese flurry of road, rail and airport building activities all around Tibet to enhance its connectivity with the other parts of China as well as with the countries of South Asia.

The reopening of the Nathu-la pass for trade between the two countries has to be looked at from the perspectives of bilateral relations. Apparently this is definitely a sign of improved relations between the two countries. Plans were afoot to open borders to the citizens of each other and trade marts along the borders were identified. Priority was accorded to Nathu-la pass in Sikkim as the first potential site for locating a border trade mart. There were ambitious proposals to establish warehouses, custom and banking facilities, transport network, a market place and even residential settlements. Yet it calls for caution on part of India as this foothold on Nathu la can also

give the scope to China to fulfill its territorial ambition and that at the cost of India's long term interest in the region. It gives a scope to China to enhance its proximity and trans border trade with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Even Tibetan region of China would be able to avail the facilities of Kolkata port and it would be easier and cheaper to travel to the eastern region of China from Tibet. Shaping response to the Chumbi Valley would perhaps require a penetrating understanding of the 'reality' that defines China's trajectory in South Asia in coming years.

The situation calls for an overall strengthening of India's defense preparedness in the region. This can be achieved not only through infrastructure construction but also by engaging Bhutan as strategic partner. India too has embarked upon a policy of infrastructure development and road construction along the border with China. The border trade from Nathu-la is kept under control with an eye on India's security concerns.

Conclusion

Chumbi Valley of Tibet is one of those many geographical corridors that have enhanced connectivity between the different parts of Asia. In this case it has been the route through which migration has taken place from Tibet to Sikkim and informal trade has always been a part of life near the border regions. All this has changed over time.

From the late 19th century onwards, the British rulers of India, out of their economic interests and imperial ambitions got involved in the great game over Tibet with their probable political adversaries – the Chinese and the Russians. Chumbi became the stage where the British ambition to open up Tibet was played out. Through it passed the expedition of 1903 - 4 that finally lifted the curtain from the forbidden land of Tibet. With the establishment of the British presence in the region, trade received a boost and the border town of Kalimpong in Darjeeling district was the direct beneficiary. Yet this was not destined to last long. With the changed political scenario of the region Chumbi Valley has now become the gateway of possible Chinese expansion beyond the Himalayas in South Asia. The valley, by virtue of its strategic location is now the point where the two great Asian

powers of China and India face each other in a war of nerves. It has become one of the most fortified and secured zones in the Himalayan belt. Whatever trade that is carried on through Nathula now is Government sponsored and restricted and the common people from either side of the border has hardly any role to alter the terms of transaction.

The little trodden path in the Chumbi Valley has transformed to a highly fortified military zone. The nature of trade has undergone a fundamental transformation. It symbolizes the historical transformation of the region as a whole.

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11. Sikkim –Tibet Convention 05.12.1893 as quoted by Moktan, *op.cit*, pp.29-30.
12. Motives and consequences of Younghusband Expedition have been discussed in many history books.. H. Louis fader has discussed the event thoroughly in pp. 176 -198 of chapter 16 ‘central asian geopolitics and the Tibetan church at Kalimpong’ of his above mentioned book.
13. The changing political climate in Lhasa and Andru Tsang’s role in mobilizing supports for Dalai Lama has been discussed in details by M.H.Goodman in

- his biography of the 14th Dalai Lama : *A Biography*, Rupa paperback, 1996, Chapter 18. His biographical sketch is also given in *Four Rivers Six Ranges*, Dharamsala, India, 1973, see pp. 253-264.
14. Dr Graham has also given a description of these people in his book *On the Threshold of Three Closed Lands*, Edinburg/London, 1897, pp. 42- 43.
 15. *The Hindu BusinessLine internet edition*, Thursday November 2003, <http://www.thehindubusinessline.in/2003/11/25/stories/2003112502160200/htm>.
 16. [http://sikkimindustries.gov.in/report%20on%20nathula%20traqde.pdf](http://sikkimindustries.gov.in/report%20on%20nathula%20trade.pdf), retrieved on 7.12.13.
 17. <http://Sikkim.com/nathula-trade-closes-for-this-year/> retrieved on 2.12.13.
 18. China's ambitions over the regions of Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh was expressed by Mao Tse Tung himself when he described Tibet was the palm with these five fingers. Medha Bisht, 'Chumbi Valley: Economic rationale but strategic resonance', IDSA Comment, 23.9.2010, [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/'Chumbi Valley: EconomicRational ebutStrategicResonance_ mbisht_230910](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/'Chumbi%20Valley:%20EconomicRational%20ebutStrategicResonance'_mbisht_230910).
 19. J.T.jacob, 'The Qinghai Tibet railway and Nathu-La – Challenge and Opportunity for India', *China Report*, 2007,43:83, p. 83.